



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

RETROGRESSION OF THE AMERICAN WOMAN.

BY FLORA McDONALD THOMPSON.

I HAVE not encountered the ghost of my great-grandmother, but something akin to it which has startled me no less. I have been face to face with the American woman of little more than half a century ago, who rose to greet me from the dusty pages of De Tocqueville's "Democracy," and who, by the light of contrast, has caused me to gasp with astonishment, beholding the degeneracy of her end-of-the-century descendant.

M. De Tocqueville, you will recall, came among us before the first woman's rights enthusiast had sounded her war-cry in the land. American woman's suffrage was not; co-education was not; the industry of woman was not in trades and the professions, but supplemented man's in the home. Also, when De Tocqueville came among us, it was soon after the "three days' revolution" in France. He was very alert to observe every operation of the principle of democracy as it might be applicable to the conditions of his own people. He believed that on the operation of that principle the happiness of his own country and the destinies of the civilized world depended. Thus it was with a great love of liberty and with jealous discernment of all that opposes its highest realization, that he "explained with a pencil of light" the successive steps and more important features of our development as a nation. A contemporaneous American critic of his production wrote: "He exhibits us in our present condition a new and, to Europeans, a strange people."

A strange people we are to ourselves, as we look backward to De Tocqueville's picture of us; and, compared with the American woman of De Tocqueville's time, the modern American woman is something more than strange. She has changed not alone with respect to outward form and manners, but in the whole under-

lying principle of her development she has so far departed from the ideals then logically set forth as indispensable to the continued growth of our national greatness, that the American woman of to-day appears to be the fatal symptom of a mortally sick nation.

De Tocqueville thus expressed his fundamental notion of woman's political importance:

"No free communities ever existed without morals; and as I have observed, morals are the work of woman. Consequently, whatever affects the condition of women, their habits and their opinions, has great political importance in my eyes."

Fancy representing to the heralds of woman's suffrage that the political future of woman is in mere virtue, that the greatness of woman is to be good, without reference to being President or even to being a school trustee!

Adhering to his original point of view, De Tocqueville enters into a minute analysis of the American woman in the character and relation of wife, and supplies a standard measured by which the retrogression of the sex becomes so clearly apparent as to be all but reducible to an arithmetical equation.

"In the United States, the inexorable opinion of the public carefully circumscribes the married woman within the narrow circle of domestic interests and duties, and forbids her to step beyond it. I by no means suppose, however, that the great change which takes place in all the habits of women in the United States, as soon as they are married, ought solely to be attributed to the constraint of public opinion; it is frequently imposed upon themselves by the effort of their own will. When the time for choosing a husband is arrived, that cold and stern reasoning power which has been educated and invigorated by the free observation of the world, teaches an American woman that a spirit of levity and independence in the bonds of marriage is a constant subject of annoyance, not pleasure; it tells her that the amusements of the girl cannot become the recreation of the wife, and that the sources of a married woman's happiness are in the home of her husband. As she clearly discerns beforehand the only road which can lead to domestic happiness, she enters upon it at once and follows it to the end without seeking to turn back."

Side by side with this vision of wifely excellence known to De Tocqueville, and to my great-grandfather, I place the history of Oklahoma, South Dakota, Newport! So far from the modern American wife steadfastly pursuing the road to domestic happiness without ever turning back, divorce statistics have determined that the actual number of American women, during twenty years, who set out on the road to domestic happiness and did turn back, or were sent back, is 328,716. Of this number 67,685, or about

one-fourth, turned back from causes involving immorality of woman, and in more than half the given instances of marriages dissolved for this cause, the law fixed the blame on the wife.

A danger De Tocqueville perceived to threaten men, in consequence of the virtue the young democracy imposed upon American women, has been unexpectedly averted:

"I am aware that the education of young women in America is not without its danger; I am sensible that it tends to invigorate the judgment at the expense of the imagination, and to make cold and virtuous women instead of affectionate wives and agreeable companions to man. Society may be more tranquil and better regulated, but domestic life has often fewer charms. These, however, are secondary evils which may be braved for the sake of higher interests."

Courageous philosopher! My poor, inevitably self-sacrificing great-grandfather! The eminent virtue of your American woman was inseparable from the perfection of a great republic; and for the discomfort it brought upon man, the latter would receive a reward—in heaven and pure politics! How is all this changed at the end of the century! What the effect upon "higher interests" is to be is a question that coming years will answer; but so far as austerity of virtue is concerned, the American wife to-day may put a man quite at his ease.

The stupendous stride this country has taken in the development of depravity since De Tocqueville held us up to the admiration of the world is forcibly suggested by a statement he makes concerning American literature and its treatment of women and morals:

"In America all books, novels not excepted, suppose women to be chaste, and no one thinks of relating affairs of gallantry."

From what, then, have you sprung, all you unnumbered hosts of American erotic writers, and all you scandal-monging daily papers of the United States? I know. Your morals and your manners are a disorder that American *nouveau riches* have contracted in travelling abroad—to Paris and other places; and, once in the blood, the disorder has been transmitted to posterity. When De Tocqueville wrote, Western gold mines were locked in the bosom of the earth; the great Chicago hog was unborn; American enterprise had not penetrated the wells of commercial cunning from which stock is freely watered; Americans were still hard at work making fortunes, and not at a loss how to employ them, and earnest toil rather compelled virtue than deferred the opportunity

of vice—an opportunity we realize to-day along with our boasted prosperity.

That the economically ideal organization of the American family has been overthrown by the aggressive spirit of the “new” woman appears with amazing clearness, placing De Tocqueville’s view of the equality of the sexes in the United States of the earlier time in contrast with the facts of to-day:

“In no country has such constant care been taken as in America to trace two clearly distinct lines of action for the two sexes, and to make them keep pace one with the other, but in two pathways which are always different. American women never manage the outward concerns of the family or conduct a business or take a part in political life; nor are they, on the other hand, ever compelled to perform the rough labor of the fields, or to make any of those laborious exertions which demand the exhaustion of physical strength. No families are so poor as to form an exception to this rule.”

Directly to the contrary to-day, over seventeen per cent. of the whole number of persons employed in all occupations are women. Furthermore, the United States Commissioner of Labor has found the number of women so employed to be constantly increasing, and that at the expense of men; the percentage of increase of women, in every given instance, showing a corresponding decrease of men. In this connection, still another suggestive fact appears in the statistics of the United States Department of Labor. In proportion as women advance in men’s industries, and thus cause the retirement of men, the latter engage in domestic labor and personal service. The American woman competes with man, not alone to his disadvantage, but to his degradation.

Involved with this chaos in the industrial order, revolution with reference to sex constantly advances in the domain of American politics. We have woman’s suffrage to some extent existing in a number of States and in several Territories of the United States, and absolutely unrestricted woman’s suffrage in four States—making a total of almost three-fifths of the whole number of States in the Union which have in some way yielded political power to woman. Also we have the American woman clamoring for every office in the gift of the people, from President to police-court justice. Supporting and furthering this anomalous economic development of the American woman is a universal system of education, founded on a theory which assumes not alone equality of the sexes, but identity of rights and opportunity. In

short, we have realized precisely the condition De Tocqueville describes as existing in the misguided minds of certain people in Europe, who, according to him, "confounding together the different characteristics of the sexes, would make of man and woman beings not only equal but alike. They would give to both the same functions, impose on both the same duties and grant to both the same rights; they would mix them in all things—their occupation, their pleasures, their business. It may readily be conceived that by thus attempting to make one sex equal to the other, both are degraded; and, from so preposterous a medley of the works of nature, nothing could ever result but weak men and disorderly women."

Further defining the admirable state of equality of the sexes originally prevailing in the United States, De Tocqueville says:

"Nor have the Americans ever supposed that one consequence of democratic principles is the subversion of marital power, or the confusion of the natural authorities in families. They held that every association must have a head in order to accomplish its object, and that the natural head of the conjugal association is man."

Certainly, this picture of wifely submission would move modern American women to scorn and their husbands to hollow mirth. Common experience anywhere in the United States to-day proves its absurdity as applied to the existing family order, and I have found, in a recent labor report of the State of Massachusetts, token of the anarchy and confusion involving "natural authorities" of the American family that is both formal and formidable.

The Bureau of Statistics of Labor of Massachusetts—Massachusetts, the State which is the greatest pride of American civilization—presenting facts concerning the earnings of heads of families, officially publishes a category of "husbands of heads of families." In this analysis of the situation there are recorded in Massachusetts eighty-five "husbands of heads of families."

Concluding his view of the happy organization of the family in America, De Tocqueville says: "I never observed that the women of America consider themselves degraded by submitting to conjugal authority. It appeared to me, on the contrary, that they attach a sort of pride to the voluntary surrender of their own will, and make it their boast to bend themselves to the yoke, not to shake it off. Such, at least, is the feeling expressed by the most virtuous of their sex."

Remembering what De Tocqueville conceived to be woman's contribution to political greatness—the morals of a country—and bearing in mind that the greatest moral force proceeds from self-immolation, the logical success of the old-fashioned American woman must be admitted.

"As for myself," says De Tocqueville, "I do not hesitate to avow that although the women of the United States are confined within the narrow circle of domestic life, and their situation is in some respects of extreme dependence, I have nowhere seen women occupying a loftier position, and if I were asked to what the singular prosperity and growing strength of the American people ought mainly to be attributed, I should reply—to the superiority of their women."

Considering the new form of superiority of the American woman at the end of the century—a superiority which is greater than all the domestic virtues, a superiority that boasts of feminine independence, a superiority that immortalizes woman and demoralizes man; considering this modern superiority of the American woman, one looks curiously to the future and asks, What of its effect upon our national character and standing?

FLORA McDONALD THOMPSON.